Chicago Public Library
In block bounded by Michigan Avenue,
Washington and Randolph Streets
and North Garland Court
Chicago
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1011

HABS
ILL,
16-CHIG,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington Planning and Service Center
1730 North Lynn Street
Arlington, Virginia

HABS
ILL,
16-CHIG,
14-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. ILL-1011

CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Address: Between Michigan Avenue on the east, Randolph Street on the north, Washington Street on the south, and North Garland Court on the west.

Present Owner: City of Chicago.

Present Use: Chicago Public Library.

Statement of Significance: The Public Library is a large, formal and elaborate academic design. It is representative of several buildings in Chicago designed by the architects Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Description of property: Fort Dearborn addition to Chicago, southwest fractional one quarter of Section 10-39-14.

2. Original and subsequent owners: The land on which the Chicago Public Library stands was the object of a dispute principally between the Chicago Public Library and the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). The settlement of this dispute allowed the library to be built, but with the provision that a G.A.R. museum and meeting rooms be maintained in the library. The following, from The Chicago Public Library, 1873-1923 (Chicago: Published by the order of the Board of Directors, 1923), pp. 31-32, outlines this early history:

> "...In 1883 the City Council officially proposed, with the consent of Congress, to dedicate the whole of Dearborn Park to the exclusive and perpetual use of the Public Library...
>
> "...While these plans were pending General John A. Logan introduced a bill into the United States Senate which passed that body providing for the use of three organizations, the Chicago Public Library, the Soldiers Home of Chicago, and the Chicago Academy of Design, to be divided equally...

"At this point the long and tedious campaign was brought to a sudden close by the decision of Justice Harlan in the U.S. District Court in the historic Lake Front case, to the effect that the title to the Fort Dearborn Addition resided in the City of Chicago. The rest was easy. The City Council was appealed to, and /on May 19, 1890/ an ordinance was passed authorizing the Public Library to take possession of Dearborn Park and, having first obtained the consent of abutting property owners, to erect thereon a building for the Public Library. The last obstacle was removed when the Library Board arrived at an amicable settlement with the Soldiers' Home of Chicago which had, by act of the Illinois Legislature in 1889, secured title to the north quarter of Dearborn Park for the purpose of erecting a Memorial Hall for the use of the soldiers and sailors of the Civil War. By the terms of this agreement the Library Board undertook to incorporate such a hall in the plans of the building and to lease the same to the veterans' organization upon nominal terms for fifty years, with reversion to the Library. The magnificent suite of apartments now oppupied by the Grand Army posts in the north end of the Library building represents the consummation of this agreement."

3. Date of erection: The project was proposed as early as 1883, but the controversy with the G.A.R. was not resolved until 1890. Competition drawings were published in 1892, reports on the foundations were published in 1893 and the building was completed in 1897.

4. Architects: Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge. This Boston firm of architects, successors to H.H. Richardson, established a Chicago office in these years, and built a number of prominent buildings in Chicago, including: The Art Institute, Michigan Avenue and Adams Street, 1892; The Electric Building, 28 North Wacker Drive, 1897, demolished 1927; The Borland Building, 105 South LaSalle Street, 1906; Corn Exchange Bank, now National Republic Bank, 122-136 South LaSalle Street, 1908; Harris Trust Company, 111-119 West Monroe Street, 1911.

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Prepared by Larry J. Homolka, Historian
National Park Service
August, 1963.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The following description of the library is from Bird's-Eye Views and Guide to Chicago(Rand, McNally and Company, 1898), and is quoted by Randall, p. 201:

"The new building fronts on Michigan Avenue, Washington, and Randolph streets; frontages, 354 feet on Michigan Avenue, 147 feet on Washington and Randolph streets, 95 feet high, in 3 principal stories, 2 intermediate floors, and a basement; 8 passenger elevators; total area, 50,367 square feet; weight 72,000 tons; 146,000 cubic feet of stone, and 1,955 tons of iron were used in construction. There is to be room for 900,000 volumes. Blue Bedford stone, granite, and limestone exterior, with large arches and columns after designs suggested by the ancient gateway at Athens which divided the Roman from the Grecian section of the city. The colonnade is Ionic, with solid piers interspersed, the frieze bearing the names of historic writers. The Washington Street entrance is treated in the Roman method, with coffers and appropriate ornamentation, while the Randolph Street entrance is in classic style, massive columns and entablature being employed. The roof is of copper. A stone balustrade surmounts the walls. The halls and corridors are finished in marble mosaic, cream-colored terra cotta in artistic designs being used on the ceilings. The G.A.R. organizations of Cook County will occupy 18,500 square feet of the north section, known as Soldiers' Memorial Hall, for a term of fifty years. Estimated cost, $1,200,000.

Prepared by Osmund Overby, Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
August, 1963

CHICAGO HERITAGE COMMITTEE
1030 E. 50th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60615

1969

# THE CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY CENTRAL BUILDING: A HISTORY

Charles G. Staples*

The Central Building of the Chicago Public Library, a monumental structure now caught in a swirl of controversy regarding its fate, was built in the period 1893-1897 and is the original permanent building of the Chicago Public Library. It was conceived and built in a grand manner in a basically classic design, entirely of masonry with provision for expansion, which though intended many times was somehow never accomplished. Over its 72 year life it has remarkably stood the test of time from a structural standpoint, but has been a source of increasing exasperation for library personnel as its practicality as a modern library facility has diminished with changing standards, and as the pressure for additional working space has increased. From an esthetic standpoint, the building has gained the affection of most of those Chicagoans who have taken the time to gaze at its unique and magnificent decorative assets. The purpose of this paper is to set forth the history of this building and to give some substantive backing to the assertion of the Chicago Heritage Committee that this structure, now gravely threatened with the prospect of demolition, is an historic and architectural landmark eminently worthy of preservation and protection by law.

Factors that militate against the salvation of the Library Building are numerous. It is caught in a kind of limbo which affects many public buildings in America, in which it is considered too old to be practical, and too young to be considered historic. Also it should be borne in mind that ours is a consumption oriented economy in which waste is encouraged and obsolescence is built into all construction and manufacture. Our material goods and structures are seen as objects to be used up, then junked or destroyed. The net result of all this is that many fine structures built near the turn of the century and intended to last centuries have been demolished. The quest for "progress" threatens to divest us of all that is enduring, and to sever people from any tangible contact with their history.

## Background History of the Library

The Chicago Public Library, a comparatively young institution, was born as a sort of stepchild of the great Chicago Fire of 1871. The people of Great Britain rallied to the aid of the distressed city by sending a gift of 12,000 books. The campaign was sparked by Thomas Hughes, author of Tom Brown's School Days, and citizens responded to his urgings that they help establish a public library in Chicago. Until early 1874, the temporary quarters were an old water tank which stood on the site later occupied by the Rookery Building. The Library was formally opened to the public in March, 1874, at a Wabash Avenue address, then in 1875

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* Chairman, Library Building Subcommittee, Chicago Heritage Committee.

moved to the Dickey Building at Lake and Dearborn Streets, a place described as a "dark and shabby suite".[1] Here it remained eleven years until a new City Hall was completed, then it occupied the fourth floor in May, 1886, now with 120,000 volumes. After another eleven years it was moved to its new and permanent home, the magnificent structure that still serves as the main building, in September, 1897. The formal opening of the Central Building took place on October 9, appropriately the 26th anniversary of the Great Fire.[2]

The Building Site: Agreement with G.A.R.

The choice of a location for the permanent home was not achieved without controversy and considerable delay. The site upon which the building now stands was formerly not occupied by buildings, but rather was a small open place known as Dearborn Park (named for the Fort Dearborn Reservation which formerly embraced the area).

The land became the object of dispute, mainly between the Chicago Public Library and the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). It was as early as 1883 that the City Council officially proposed that all of Dearborn Park be dedicated "to the exclusive and perpetual use of the Public Library". At about the same time a bill was passed in the U.S. Senate that provided for three organizations to share equally the space of Dearborn Park, namely the Public Library, The Soldiers Home of Chicago, and The Chicago Academy of Design. The dispute was resolved when Justice Harlan of the U.S. District Court ruled that the title to the "Fort Dearborn Addition" belonged to the City of Chicago rather than the federal government. The Library Board then appealed to the city, and on May 19, 1890 an ordinance was passed authorizing the Public Library to take possession of Dearborn Park, for the purpose of erecting a library. Consent of abutting property owners was required for such building, and in 1890 an agreement was worked out with the Soldiers Home of Chicago which by act of the state legislature in 1889 had gained title to the north quarter of Dearborn Park for the purpose of erecting a Memorial Hall for use of Civil War soldiers and sailors. In the agreement, the Library Board consented to incorporating such a hall into the plans for the building.[3]

On June 2, 1891 the Illinois Legislature passed "An Act to authorize the Chicago Public Library to erect and maintain a public library on Dearborn Park in the City of Chicago and to authorize The Soldiers Home in Chicago to sell and dispose of its interest in the north one-quarter of said park", with the proviso that a hall be included "to be known and forever maintained as a memorial hall" to commemorate the heroism of Union Soldiers in the Civil War, this hall to be leased by the library to the Grand Army Hall and Memorial Association of Illinois for a period of fifty years (this period was extended an additional fifty years, to July, 1991, by amendment to the act on July 17, 1941).[4]

The agreement to build the library in Dearborn Park was seen as a mistake by some, due to the open space sacrificed.[5] Negotiations were undertaken with neighboring businesses, and as a result, it was agreed that no entrance would face on Michigan Avenue, also that the ends of the building would be set back fifteen feet from Washington and Randolph Streets.[6] The main entrance was to be located on Washington Street, and the Randolph Street entrance was envisioned as primarily for the use of the Soldiers Memorial Hall.

## The Building Contract

When the Library Board called for competitive bids for building their permanent edifice, thirteen designs were submitted, all with some degree of similarity. This is understandable when one reviews the requirements set down by the Board for building design and standards.

> "first, obtaining a maximum of daylight, in conjunction with a maximum of floor space. Second, dividing the building into fireproof compartments by means of fireproof floors and brick or tile division walls. Third, providing for future additions so as not ... to mar the external appearance of the building ... Conditions limiting the occupation of the site on Dearborn Park and construction are ... to provide a space of 15,000 square feet (for the Memorial Hall) ... the necessity of placing book or "stack" rooms on the Michigan Avenue front, because of its superior light -advantages ... the building is to be a masonry structure as opposed to a steel frame and brick shell construction ... A classic order of architecture without dome or tower is to be employed and is to be executed in granite or Bedford bluestone. The exterior shall to a degree make known the purpose of the building, and it should convey to the beholder that it is an enduring monument worthy of a great and public-spirited city." [7]

Other stipulations were that the cost should not exceed $1,200,000; that the roof should be of low pitch, to shed rain water toward interior court, and that the windows be stationary with outside ledges large enough for window cleaners. It seems that no details were overlooked!

The successful bidder was the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge, successors to the noted H.H. Richardson (designer of Chicago's noted Glessner House). This organization also planned other Chicago buildings, including the Art Institute. Their plan was adopted by the Board of Directors on September 25, 1891 and signed by John G. Shortall, President, and W.B. Wickersham, Secretary. [8]

## Foundation Engineering

In order to assure the permanence of the new building, the architects engaged the service of General William Sooy Smith, a Civil War bridge engineer, to design a foundation that would support the massive weight of the proposed building over Chicago's great depth of mud and clay, the undoing of many a building in the city. Smith employed the use of deep driven log piles in which an important milestone in Chicago building was achieved. Though log piles had been used a few times prior in Chicago buildings (including S.S. Beman's noted Grand Central Station), there had been no consistency in their use.[9] The Library's foundations represented the first known tested application of deep-driven piles. Fifty foot oak logs of 13-inch diameter were driven to hardpan about 74 feet below grade, and cut off at about 24 feet below grade so as to keep them entirely and permanently below the water table, and thus prevent decay that would result from exposure to air. Testing of stability was by means of applying the

weight of 50 tons of pig iron to sample piles. When these did not settle after eleven days, they were then arranged so as to support an average of 30 tons each.[10] Two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven piles support the 72,000 tons of the building," and even to now there has been no appreciable settling. Obviously, the library's foundation was eminently successful in its application. A similarly successful usage was in the even more massive Federal building (demolished in 1965).[12] The use of this kind of foundation then became quite popular in Chicago and important to the development of Chicago building. Later, the concrete caisson, extending to bedrock, came into more general use.[13]

The Building

Chief credit for the specific design of the building and of its general decorative concept is attributed to Mr. C.A. Coolidge, resident member of the Chicago office of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge. Efforts were made to achieve in the building a highly useful, adequate, comfortable, durable, dignified, refined and elegant place. An early review stated that "these requirements are thoroughly fulfilled in the Chicago Public Library".[14]

Construction of the Library was massivc in its conception and intricate in detail. One hundred and forty-six thousand cubic feet of stone were employed. Wall-bearing masonry was used, and the exterior was built of Bedford "blue" oolitic limestone from Indiana, and Hallowell granite from the southwest part of Maine. The building fronts 354 feet on Michigan Avenue and 147 feet on Washington and Randolph Streets. It is 95 feet high in three stories and two intermediate floors plus basement. Total ground area is 50,367 square feet, and the building's weight is 72,000 tons. There are 1,955 tons of iron in the structure, some of this in elaborate decorative ironwork.[15]

Decorative motifs in the building were elaborate and magnificent in their conception, and include a remarkable array of marble, both domestic and imported. Most notable here is the Italian Carrara statuary marble of the south stair hall, in which is located one of the truly great monumental staircases of America, and one of very few "grand" staircases left in Chicago. In its sparkling cosmati work (mosaic inlays) is the bright green Connemara marble of County Galway, Ireland. In the Grand Army Hall is extensive use of the rare dark green "verd antique" marble. In the north entry hall is pink Knoxville marble, and in the reference room, siena marble. Other stone comprising the Library's interior are green-veined white Vermont marble, Tennessee roseal marbles, and an import called "C.F. Italian".[16]

Also important in the decorative motifs of the structure is the decorative plasterwork which adorns ceilings of the great halls, and the north entry hall, adding to the sense of classic grandeur.

The grand staircase, referred to above, is in the south foyer and with its geometric array of angles and curves and glittering cosmati inlays, is one of the most exciting architectural sights to be seen in America. The north staircase, though not as showy, holds fascination for the viewer with its alternation of straight and curved flights of steps.

The Mosaics

Most highly regarded of all the building's decorative assets are the mosaics of the south hall stairs, above described, and of the elegant humanities room adjoining at the third floor level. This array of decoration, inlaid in white Carrara marble was hailed at the time of its conception as the largest, most costly, elaborate and beautiful such work executed since the great Italian church mosaics of the fourteenth century,[17] and to this day is certainly one of the finest such displays in North America. The library mosaics are more properly called Cosmati work, a craft originating in Italy in which glass, stone, and other colorful and reflective materials are inlaid in white marble.[18] The designs that so lavishly grace the library remain as fresh and exciting today as when newly made. They were

> "illuminated everywhere by sparkling inlays and panels of glass mosaics, composed of geometrical bits of favrile glass, mother of pearl and shells, set in endlessly varied linear patterns, producing an effect of white and pale green. These mosaics are often purposely set on splayed surface and have slight irregularities in surface to increase their brilliancy when viewed under electric lights ... examination reveals an infinite variety of details." [19]

It is worth noting that the architects took cognizance of the problem of sooty air emanating from the nearby rail yards, and therefore wisely chose this durable art form rather than painted murals, which had been considered.[20]

Included in the inlays are quotations from historic literary figures in praise of books. These mural inscriptions appear in ten languages. Also reproduced are historic printers' marks from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[21] There is no greater display of this craft known to us in the United States.

Credit for the basic design of the Library's mosaics is attributed to Robert C. Spencer, Jr., an architect and early associate of Frank Lloyd Wright who designed homes in the "Prairie School" tradition after 1900.[22] The commission for the execution of this vast and elegant array was undertaken by J.A. Holzer, a mosaic expert formerly associated with The House of Tiffany, but who had taken on this job as one of his first independent commissions. Holzer had fashioned church mosaics and windows under the aegis of Tiffany, and then in 1896 established his own studio. Another major commission of Holzer was the Alexander Commencement Hall, in Princeton, New Jersey.[23]

Other Features of the Building

Also notable in the decorative scheme of the Central Building is the elaborate ironwork and the Tiffany-style glass domes. Purely decorative ironwork is most notable in the Moorish designed window grilles at landings of the grand staircase. These, and the ironwork in which the glass domes are mounted are the product of the Chicago Ornamental Iron Company. Other iron decoration in the Library is attributed to the Winslow Brothers Company.[24]

One of the practical features included in the building was a system of pneumatic tubes. Woodwork and furnishings were from such fine varieties as prima vera and white mahogany. The total cost of the Library with furnishings and equipment was about $2,000,000.

An interesting note about the care with which this building was conceived, and the great detail involved, is in this excerpt from an 1898 architectural review.

> "... it should be noted that 1200 drawings were made for it, besides numberless sketches, which fully occupied 25 draftsmen for one year. All of the internal furniture, fixtures and decorations were designed by the architects, no stock or trade fittings being used in the building ..."

This review also remarked

> "Fortunate indeed are the citizens of that city in which the love of literature and art are strong enough to make its public library the most imposing architectural building and its most attractive intellectual resort." [25]

Later Years

Scarcely two decades had passed when some local architects and others poked derisive scorn at the Library Building, scoring it for aspects of impracticality, inadequate space, difficulty of passage, etc. Since the architects had in their plan made provision for expansion of the Central Building, moves were later made to build an addition to help cope with the increasing problem of space. Last such move was in 1938, but expansion never materialized, possibly due to problems in financing or acquisition of property. The next 26 years were characterized by somnolence of the city and library authorities, and little was done to bring about either expansion or beneficial changes in the system. Sharp questions raised by the Chicago Daily News in May, 1965 and by Alderman Leon M. Despres regarding the lagging library system in Chicago sparked moves for reform, and have naturally led to the present controversy regarding the future of the main building.[26]

Regard for the intrinsic value of the building reached a low ebb in the early 1960's, with such epithets hurled by newspaper writers and other critics that the structure was "a Gothic horror of unused space", a "drab gray fortress", a "monstrosity", etc. In 1967, however, the Holabird and Root architectural survey of the building recommended its renovation and enlargement.[27] With the recent renaissance of interest in the artisanry and workmanship to be found in older houses and public buildings, and in the irreplaceable fine work to be found in these places, numerous modern architects and artists have taken up the cudgels in defense of the old library. The AIA's local magazine, Inland Architect,[28] has sparked a drive for its preservation, along with the Chicago Heritage Committee. Architects Jack Hartray and Norman Johnson proposed a plan to save the Central Library through building a new high-rise structure west of the present building and joining the new and old in a unique combination.[29] The Chicago Tribune suggested expansion northward across Randolph Street.[30]

And now, with the issuance of the Lowell Martin survey report which recommends the Central Building's demolition, the fight appears to be on in earnest.

## Conclusions

Through our research findings reported in this paper, there seems to be little doubt that the Central Building of the Chicago Public Library is a notable landmark in Chicago architecture that should be preserved for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C., in support of the main library's preservation, makes the point that the building is structurally significant. They assert that the library does, according to their criteria of value "embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type inherently valuable for a study of a period of construction", in this case that branch of monumental building construction in which revived classic motifs were emphasized.[31]

The Library Building was catalogued in 1963 as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey, one of a number of important structures in Chicago that were "carefully selected as notable examples of the development of architecture in the United States." Records are maintained in the Library of Congress.[32]

From a technical standpoint, we conclude that the library's foundation engineering was an important milestone in the development of large buildings and of the skyscraper in Chicago. As noted, the pre-tested system of deep-driven log piles was the best in Chicago at its time and was the progenitor for many such foundations which later supported Chicago buildings very effectively. The building's fireproof compartmentalization was also an achievement, and to this day almost guarantees that there cannot be a massive fire such as has destroyed supposedly fireproof modern steel frame structures. These compartments may in part explain the curious difficulty of passage in parts of the structure, but we hasten to note here that Chicago's new Civic Center has had similar criticisms leveled at it. Newness is certainly no guarantee of either utility or safety.

Decorative considerations are certainly the most tangible, notable and obvious reasons for the preservation of the building. The mosaic and marble inlays featured in the south lobby and humanities department combined form one of the most fabulous and exciting arrays of this craft outside of old Europe. A recent caller tried to liken its splendor to Spain's Alhambra. Though they cannot be called comparable, the design, color and extent of this fine work cannot help but thrill the beholder. Throughout the building the massive rooms with their ironwork, decorative plaster, Tiffany glass, and exotic marbles create a magical old world quality that cannot be recaptured at any price. Hartray also aptly notes that the two rotundas "provide uniquely humane interior spaces not attainable in the age of the acoustic ceiling".[33]

One must also recognize the fact that the building was intentionally built as a monument to literature and culture in our city, and as such was designed to last indefinitely. Great care was exercised in making an edifice of unusual strength and durability, and it has held up remarkably well. With proper care, centuries of service can well be expected. We ask if this

building should be any less prized, revered, and protected a monument than a piece of statuary, which though non-utilitarian, is considered automatically sacrosanct. The library is a true work of art, in a monument of consummate skill and artisanry that cannot be recovered at any cost once destroyed. In this excellent building, we have the legacy of an elegant and enduring monument given to us by our forbears to care for and in turn give to future generations, and we must not throw it away.

We caution those who are comforted by talk of somehow transferring the grand staircase and "some" of the mosaics to any new building. Such an operation would not only place these decorations into a strange context, but would also pose such an expensive and difficult archaeological and engineering operation that, unless the money and the will were to be available, the project almost certainly would be given up as prohibitively costly and complicated.

The Chicago Heritage Committee therefore asks that every effort be made to include the present magnificent structure in any expansion plan. We concur with the general recommendations set forth by Hartray and Johnson that new and old be combined with imagination, and that the original building, with minimal necessary remodeling, be used for library and other appropriate functions, such as meeting hall, museum, and reading room space. We believe that the recently established Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks must exercise its responsibility to the needs of our city by moving to designate this monumental building as an official "Landmark" to be protected by law.

A writer in the Daily News in 1964 pleaded for Chicago not to splinter and fragment our heritage of architecture into pieces that go either to museums, collectors, or the trash heap. He made this eloquent statement about the seeming local attitude:

> "In America (Chicago especially) neither birthright nor time matters much. Great glee seems to be taken in local braggadocio of a new, taller skyline shutting out the sky. Are we building a stage set for sea urchins?" [4]

With our heritage in fragments, how can anyone really know what our city was like in the past? Many have asked me "what will we have to show our children?" A city that cares not for its tangible history is, I think, a city without a soul.

Chicago cannot afford to lose this important aspect of its architectural history. The Central Library Building is a landmark of inestimable value and quality that must be saved.

April 1, 1969

Charles G. Staples

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7. The Inland Architect and News Record, March, 1892. pp. 24-25

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22. Prairie School Review, First quarter, 1967, p. 18 footnote (re: Robert Closson Spencer, Jr., a partner in firm of Spencer and Parsons after 1905)

23. Koch, Robert, Louis C. Tiffany, Rebel in Glass. New York: Crown Publishers, 1964. pp. 56, 99, 111

24. Inland Architect, January, 1898, p. 22

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b. Condit, Carl, The Chicago School of Architecture. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964. p. 96

c. Chicago Tribune Magazine, September 10, 1967. (color photographs of interior by Ron Bailey)